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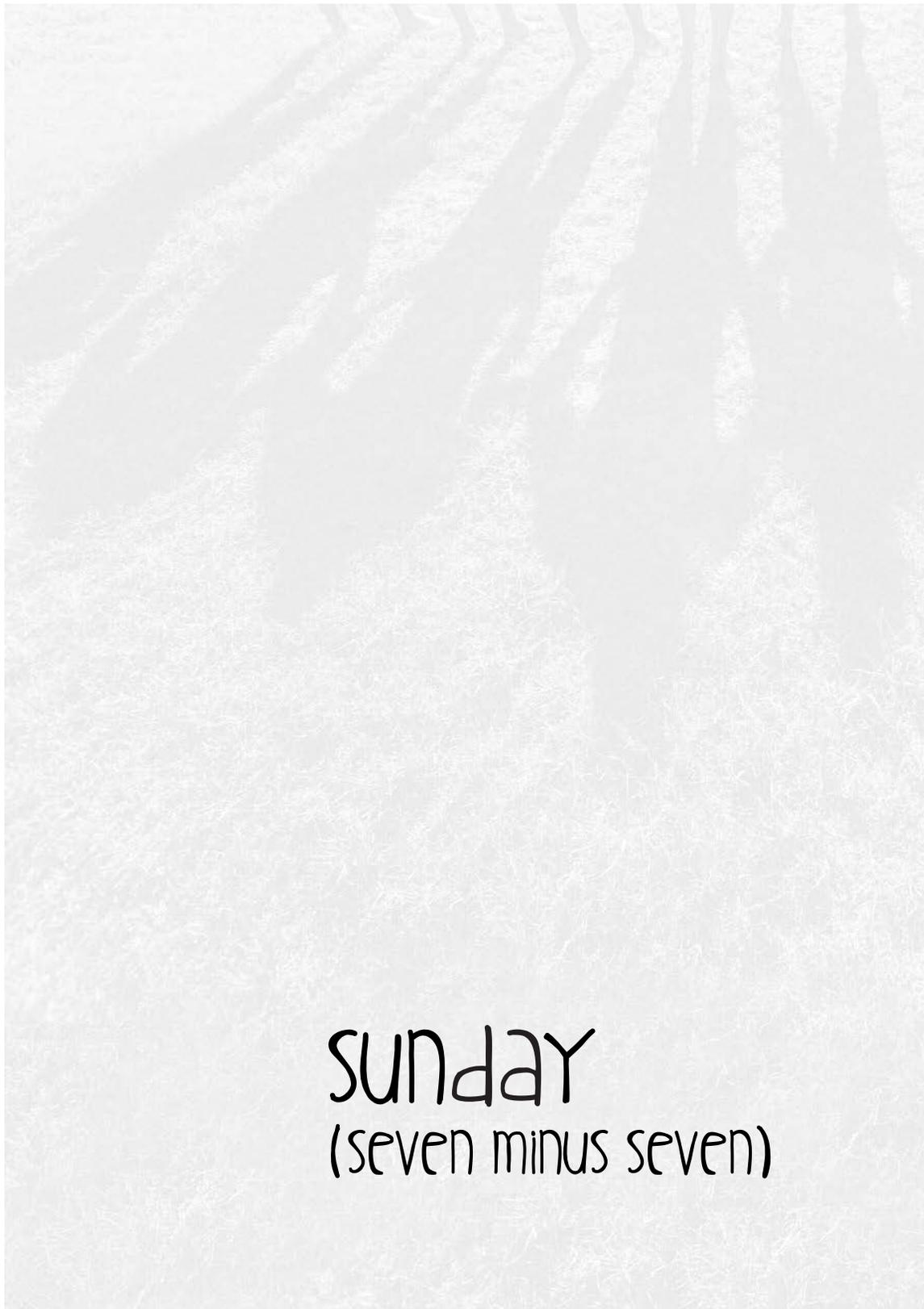
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For the kids and volunteers of the Front Porch Library

Special thanks to my friend Mackenzie Moore-Adams.
You're an inspiration!

And thanks, as always, to the Wednesday Night Writers—
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patient listeners and honest critics who are more
helpful than any magic hat.





SUNDAY
(seven minus seven)

CASS

It was the first day of summer vacation—well, second, really. But Saturday didn't count since I'd had to help Mama clean house. Jemmie, my best friend, hoped summer would go by quick. She couldn't wait to get to high school, where we could run track for real.

My kind-of-boyfriend, Ben, wished he could skip summer *and* high school and hit the road. All he needed was a license. And a car. And no little brother to watch.

His best friend and shadow, Justin, would do whatever Ben did.

Me? I wanted to run track for real, sure. But I knew everything was about to change. High school would be different. I liked things the way they'd always been in the neighborhood.

Just the way they were today.

We were all together, shooting hoops in the street in front of Mr. Barnett's, taking shots at a rusty hoop left over from his grown-up kids.

"Say, Cass!" yelled Ben's little brother, Cody. "You know what day it is?" He swung around, hugging the ball. "Don't tell her, Ben!"

I pushed my damp bangs off my forehead with the back of my arm. "The start of summer vacation?"

"No!" Cody crowed. "It's seven minus seven!"

Jemmie brushed a hand across Cody's buzz cut. "Equals zero?"

“N-O! It’s my seventh birthday minus seven days!” He looked down at the ball in his hands, bounced it once, then hugged it again.

“Go on!” Ben clapped twice. “Take your shot while you’re still six.”

“Oh, right. Sure.” Cody swung the ball between his legs a couple of times and shouted, “Hey, bop-a-loo-bop!” which he says is lucky, and let it fly.

“Oh man,” Ben groaned as the ball sailed right over the backboard and landed on the roof of Mr. Barnett’s carport.

Cody twisted a fistful of his surfer-dude T-shirt. “Oops?”

Ben trudged over and rapped on Mr. Barnett’s door. The knock set off the old man’s two yappy little dogs, Killer and Lillian, but Ben had to ask permission to climb onto the hood of his pickup to get our ball—everyone said Mr. B has a gun and that he’s a little crazy because he got messed up fighting in Vietnam.

We watched Ben boost himself up on the hood. He fingertip-rolled the ball toward him until he could grab it. “Warm-up’s over, people.” The pavement rang under his sneakers as he jumped down. “Let’s play!”

Like always, it was Girls versus Guys.

“Three against two!” Cody yelled. “We are *so* going to win.”

Ben’s dark bangs hung over his eyes as he bounced the ball from hand to hand. “The teams are Cass and Jemmie on Girls, me and Justin on Guys. Cody, you can fetch loose balls.”

“Fetch?” Cody’s shoulders drooped. “What do you think I am? A dog?”

I tried to cheer him up. “Hey, running loose balls is important.”

“No it isn’t! I wanna *play*, Ben.” He bounced on his heels like he had to pee. “Please?”

I would’ve let Cody play—I have a big sister, and I know what it’s like to be the little kid. Just a few months ago, Ben would’ve let him too.

But today, he just crossed his arms.

“You gotta let me!” Cody stamped a foot. “Mom’s paying you to watch me!”

“And, oh boy, am I going to earn it,” Ben muttered. “Listen, let’s make a deal. You take another shot. Hit it and you’re in. Miss and you run loose balls.”

I knew what Cody would be doing one free throw from now. He never scores.

Considering his brother’s offer, Cody grabbed the pole of the basketball hoop and swung himself around it.

Ben shook his head. “This is going to be one long, hot, boring, brother-bugged summer.”

“Hey, summer’s gonna be great!” I didn’t want him to jinx it.

Cody held out his hands. “Sure, okay.”

Ben tossed the ball. Cody whooped, surprised that he had caught it.

I reached for his shoulder as he trotted toward the chalked free-throw line. “Cody, you might want to”—he flung the ball—“aim.” I watched it whump down on the carport roof.

The ball rolled to a stop in a pile of rotten leaves.

Justin rocked back on the worn-down heels of his kicks. “Good luck, Ben. You’re gonna need a broom to reach that one.”

Ben stared up at the ball, then turned and pointed down the street. “Go home, Cody. Now. And don’t come back till you’ve had a couple more birthdays.”

“B-but—” Cody sputtered. “I’m your paying summer job! Dad said!”

Ben’s arm stayed straight out. “Only on weekdays.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” Cody’s face was getting all splotchy.

“Come on, Ben.” I jogged over to Cody. “We know you didn’t.” I put a hand on his hot, damp shoulder. It felt trembly, like he was trying not to cry.

Ben walked over too, and dropped to one knee in front of him. “Give me a break, Cody. Go home. Bug Mom for a while. Let us get in a couple of games before school starts again.”

Cody drooped away, kicking the curb every other step.

I latched on to Ben’s T-shirt and swung him around. “You could’ve been a little nicer!” I whispered.

“I’m tired of being nice,” he whispered back. “And I’m tired of getting balls off the roof. And I’m tired of the same old, same old.” He looked around like the same old, same old included everything, even me. “I wish,” he said, jamming his fists into the pockets of his cutoffs, “just for once, something exciting would happen around here.”

This might just be the last summer of all of us together. Why couldn’t he just enjoy it? “Be careful what you wish for,” I warned.

He blew out, riffling his bangs. “Why? Wishes never come true anyway.”

CODY

Cody stomped up the porch steps and shoved the front door open. “*Mo-om*. Ben’s being mean!” He stomped into the kitchen. No Mom.

He opened the refrigerator, listened to the hum. Looked. Nothing good. As he closed the door, the postcard from his missing uncle—the card with the picture of the chicken platter on it—caught his eye. He wished he had a piece of fried chicken right now, but except for when Dad treated him and Ben to McDonald’s or Kentucky Fried Chicken, his family was vegetarian.

He wandered into the living room, remembered Ben, and kicked the couch. Then he flopped down on his back on the floor and stared up at the ceiling fan.

The blades went around...and around...and around...

Joey Fowler, the kid in his class with the thick, bug-eye glasses, said that one time he stared at a fan so long without blinking, he hypnotized himself.

Around...and around... Cody’s eyeballs were getting dry from not blinking, but he didn’t feel hypnotized. Just sleepy.

He closed his eyes and smiled. The breeze from the fan felt good on his sweaty face. Something thumped in the closet on the other side of the room. “Aaaah!” Cody sprang to his knees. “Who’s in there?”

Mom stuck her head out from behind the closet door. “Your mother.”

“Why are you in the closet?”

“Sorting things out to go to Goodwill. Why are you not out with Ben and the gang?”

“Because...” Cody chewed on his bottom lip. “Because Ben *made* me come home.”

“He did?” Mom walked over and sat down cross-legged in front of him. She tucked her flowery skirt under her bare feet and opened her arms. “Need a little lap time?”

He looked at her lap, but he was seven minus seven. Too old to climb onto a lap. He scooted closer so their knees touched. “Ben won’t let me be on Guys.”

Mom’s long hair brushed his arm as she leaned toward him. “Maybe you should give him some space, Cody. Ben and his friends are about to start high school. You’re a lot younger than they are.”

“I’m almost seven!”

“Speaking of almost seven...” She pushed to her feet and padded to the bookcase. She picked up an envelope leaned against the row of family photo albums and a package wrapped in brown paper. “You got a birthday card, and a present. They came yesterday, but I forgot.”

“But Mom, getting the mail is *my* job.” Nobody let him do *anything* around here.

“I didn’t *get* the mail. The mailman walked it up because of the package.” She held the box out for him to see.

“Who’s it from?”

“Aunt Sandy.”

“Oh.” He didn’t even ask if he could shake it—Aunt Sandy gave Aunt Sandy presents, which meant it was something dumb. “What about the card?”

“I guess it’s from one of your friends.”

He didn't have any friends who sent cards, except valentines in the class valentine box.

The envelope she put in his hand looked like it had been run over a couple of times and there wasn't any return address. Cody didn't think people were allowed to send a letter without a return address, but it had gotten to him, Cody Paul Floyd.

He was going to open it, but he flipped it over first and saw writing on the back: *Do not open till your birthday, or monkeys will fly out your butt.* He looked up at Mom, shocked. "The B-word!"

Mom read the note over his shoulder. "It sounds like something that would come out of your brother's mouth, or Justin's." She took the card back and walked it and the Aunt Sandy package over to the stairs, where she set them on the bottom step—which meant he had to carry them up to his room the next time he went up. "Better forget the card until your birthday. You don't want monkeys to fly out of your B-word." She didn't have to tell him not to open the present.

Cody slumped, remembering. "Ben says I can't shoot hoops with them till I have *two* birthdays."

"*Two* birthdays? Well, we'd better find you something to do in the meantime. Why don't you help me go through the closet?" She held her hands out to him.

He slapped his hands into hers. "Okay."

Mom pulled him to his feet and led him across the room. She pointed to a heap on the floor. "This is the giveaway pile."

"Hey!" He swooped up the fuzzy brown thing on top of the stack. "My bear costume!"

"It doesn't fit you anymore. Let another kid get some use out of it."

He held the bear up to his chest. The feet dangled against his shins. "Oh, okay." The bear looked sad and crumpled when he dropped it back on top of Dad's old hockey skates.

“Check out the stuff on the closet floor.” Mom shoved a step stool out of the way with one bare foot. “Board games. Go through them. I’ll fix us a snack.”

Cody knelt in the open closet door. Candy Land? Chutes and Ladders? Baby games. He didn’t look through the whole stack. The smelly old games made his nose itch. Knee-walking, he shoved them over to the giveaway pile.

He glanced up. Hanging over the edge of the closet’s high shelf were the floppy ears of one of the bunny mittens Aunt Sandy had knit for him. “You are *so* going to Goodwill!”

On tiptoes, he reached up and grabbed an ear. One good yank and the bunny came down, staring at him with blue button eyes. But he knew he needed both stupid bunny mittens for some other kid to get use out of, so he shoved the stool in close and climbed up.

All he could see was a stack of sweaters at the front of the shelf. He swept the pile off the shelf with his arm. Sweaters landed—*whump*—on the floor.

He reached farther and felt a crinkle. “Plastic bag.” He grabbed a corner and yanked. “Ka-boom!” The bag of old magazines exploded on the floor.

When he reached again, his fingers touched something stiff—the bill of Ben’s old Little League cap. He flicked the cap across the room. It sailed all the way to Dad’s recliner and landed on the seat. “He shoots, he scores!”

Still no second bunny mitten. He patted his hand across the wooden shelf.

Felt empty.

The stool wobbled as he pushed up on his toes and reached way...way...way back. He was ready to give up when his fingers brushed against something too velvety to be a bunny mitten.

It made a *shhhh* sound as he inched it across the shelf. When he got it to the edge, a gray curve stuck out like a sliver of moon. “Hey,

are you another hat?” He pulled it down. “Wow,” he breathed.

The hat was the same browny gray as Elvis, his kindergarten class’s pet gerbil. It felt the same too. Except it didn’t shiver when he held it.

He plopped it on his head and—*whoosh*—the world disappeared.

Inside the hat smelled like G-dad’s cough drops. The lining felt silky against his ears when he turned his head.

He heard Mom cross the living room. “Hey there, mystery man!”

The hat lifted and he smelled her clove perfume, then peanut butter.

“Ants on a log?” She held out a plate of peanut butter–stuffed celery sticks with raisins crawling on them.

He took the hat out of her hand and turned it over. “Dobbs,” he read. The silver letters on the satin lining were perfect—like girl printing. “Who’s Dobbs?”

“The manufacturer. Or”—Mom set the hat on his head carefully, so it balanced on his forehead—“you! You look like one of those old-time detectives.”

He picked up a celery stick and crunched down on it, thinking. Dad only ever wore ball caps, except for that Santa hat when he thought Cody was too young to know he wasn’t the *real* Santa. “Whose hat is this anyway?”

Mom’s forehead wrinkled. “It’s Uncle Paul’s.”

“For really?” Cody blinked. “Dad’s brother? The one who disappeared?” He took another celery bite. “I’m seven minus seven and I never even met him.”

“Actually, he lived with us for a while.”

“Get out!” He jabbed his celery stick at her. “He lived with us?”

“Get out yourself!” She jabbed back with her celery stick. “He sure did. You were only three, probably too young to remember. The last we heard from him was that postcard on the refrigerator.”

“The chicken platter?”

“The Space Needle. It’s in Seattle. It just *looks* like a tray with a lid.”

Long as Cody could remember, the postcard had never *not* been on the fridge. It was like it grew there. “We haven’t heard from him for a long, long time.”

“Not for a long, long, *long* time.” Mom sighed.

Cody sort of remembered some photos from the family albums, but back then, Dad was just a chunky kid, his uncle a little skinny one.

“According to your dad, he was always restless and irresponsible, even as a kid. He just never took hold anywhere.”

Cody had heard Dad tell Ben he had to “take hold” plenty of times. “Where’s Uncle Paul now?”

“Who knows? Your uncle Paul is a wanderer.”

“Maybe he’ll wander back here.”

“Really, Detective Dobbs?” She leaned in, touching her forehead to the brim of the hat. “Is that inside information?”

Cody played along. “Check. That means yes in detective talk.”

“Good. Report back if you learn anything more.”

“Check.”



With the closet sorted, Cody dug for a while out behind the toolshed, looking for dinosaur bones. Ben had told him he could forget dinosaurs, except for the four junker cars parked in what Dad called his “dinosaur graveyard.” But Cody was sure there were some real bones out there. Big ones. Digging with a bent trowel, he found a broken bottle and a baseball-size rock that would look better when he washed the dirt off. The hat watched from a lawn chair, staying clean.

But it got too hot to keep digging. And too boring. He wiped his hands on his shorts, picked up the hat, and went inside.

Mom was kneading bread, her long hair twisted back out of her face in a knot held with two chopsticks. “Want to punch the dough?” she asked.

“Nuh-uh. You can punch it. Want me to check on Ben?”

Mom glanced at the clock. “I guess you’ve given your brother enough of a break. But *watch* the game, okay? Fans are important too, you know.”

Cody put on the hat and pushed the door open with one shoulder.

“Did you hear me, Detective Dobbs?” Mom called. “Don’t crowd your brother.”

“Check.” Grabbing the brim so the hat would stay put, he jumped off the top porch step.

Cody walked down the driveway, keeping his head tipped back so the hat wouldn’t slide. “Detective Dobbs was walking down the street,” he said.

He stepped off the curb and—*foosh*—the hat slid down over his eyes.

It was pretty dark, but looking down, he could see his sneakers, one with the lace dragging.

He forgot the untied shoe when he saw a rock with sparkles in it next to the curb. He reached down and put the rock in his pocket.

Way down the street, a bouncing ball twanged against the road. Ben said that was “the call of the ball.”

Cody followed the call, stepping one foot up on the curb and the other one down on the road. Up and down he walked like that, smelling cough drops and his own peanut-butter breath.

The ball was still calling, but now there was another noise too, like a dog scratching the door to come in. When he got close to it, the sound stopped.

Looking down, he saw worn leather sandals, dark feet with ashy toes, and the straws of a broom worn away on one side.

“Is this Cody Floyd I see walkin’ blind down the road?” said a sandpapery voice.

“No.”

“No? Then who we got under this big old go-to-work hat?”

The hat lifted. Light flooded in.

“Too bright!”

“It’s called daylight—and it helps if you want to see where you’re going.” The skin around the eyes that stared into his crinkled in a smile.

“Hi, Nana Grace.”

Jemie’s grandmother leaned the broom against her shoulder. The scratchy sound must’ve been her sweeping her driveway. “What you playing at, Cody, blindman’s bluff?”

“I’m not Cody, I’m Detective Dobbs.”

“Well now, Detective Dobbs.” She put one hand on her bony hip, holding the hat with the other. “They got ‘eye’ in ‘private eye’ for a reason. To *be* one, you gotta be able to *see*.”

Nana Grace brushed the top of the hat with her fingertips. “This hat is mighty fine, but the way you’re wearin’ it you’re gonna get yourself killed.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to have to tell your mama you been hit by a car.”

“I’m staying right at the edge. I’m being careful.”

She pointed down. “While you’re being careful, tie that shoe.”

“Yes ma’am.” He knelt on the hot road, pulled the lace tight, made the two loops, and knotted them. He stood up again. “May I have my hat back?”

Nana Grace bit her lip and squinted at him. “Bend your ears flat and hold ’em that way.”

“Why?” But he bent his ears flat like she said. Nana Grace

grandmothered all the neighborhood kids. Everyone listened to her.

Using his ears the way Dad used shelf brackets, Nana Grace set the hat back on his head. She crossed her skinny arms and nodded once. "That'll work."

"Bye, Nana Grace." Now he could see, but his ears didn't like being shelf brackets. At the corner he eased the hat up to give them a break and they popped up straight.

He let the hat drop over his face again and followed the call of the ball.